



Evaluating the Public Health Outcomes of the Cambridgeshire Time Credits Project Summary and Conclusions

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Aims

The aim of the research was to evaluate the outcomes of the Time Credits project in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, with a focus on health outcomes. In particular, to determine the initiative's potential to tackle social exclusion and loneliness and to assess the extent to which it can improve wellbeing and increase community cohesion and social capital.

Community approach to public health

One increasingly important approach to reducing health inequalities is through improving social capital and reducing isolation. There is solid evidence that increased levels of community engagement and social participation have a positive impact on health behaviours, physical and emotional health and self-confidence, especially among disadvantaged populations. These benefits are so widely acknowledged that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance endorses community engagement as a strategy for health improvement.

FIGURE 1 HOW EARNING AND SPENDING TIME CREDITS CAN LEAD TO POSITIVE HEALTH OUTCOMES



Time Credits

Time Credits are a way of recognising and celebrating the time people spend volunteering with a local organisation, community group, volunteer group or a statutory sector service provider.

In exchange for their contribution, the volunteers 'earn' a Time Credit note, one for every hour they give. These can be 'spent' on a range of leisure and other opportunities, typically donated by organisations, local businesses and corporations to allow the community members to take advantage of their spare capacity. They can also be spent on activities run by other community members, on activities at the organisation they were earned with, and to trade time and skills with other individuals.

Wisbech

Wisbech is a historic inland port on the River Nene to the north of Cambridgeshire. Agriculture and food production are central to the town's economy, but the nature of the employment created is often unattractive to young local people, low-skilled, seasonal, erratic and insecure, and employs a high proportion of migrant labour. The town has above average levels of deprivation and a range of challenging social issues. High levels of recent migration have caused local tensions.

Time Credits in Wisbech

There are 16 active local organisations where people can earn Time Credits. These include schools, homeless hostels, children's centres, an adventure playground and a project supporting people into employment. Activities that volunteers can do to earn Time Credits include reading with children, running after school clubs, gardening, office work, working in a café and kitchen and litter picking. Volunteers can spend Time Credits on activities such as the gym, swimming, going to the cinema, having beauty and hair treatments, attending social events and going to the theatre.

Methods overview

The research used a mixed methods research design that included both quantitative and qualitative methodological tools:

- Interviews with key stakeholders
- Literature review and systematic review of Time Credits and health outcomes
- Secondary data analysis
- Developing a theory of change
- Longitudinal survey with individual new Time Credit members
- Face to face interviews with individual Time Credit members
- Survey and face to face interviews with partner organisations
- Ethnographic methods including visual ethnographies and participant observation.

How Time Credits can lead to positive health outcomes

The findings indicate that the Time Credits project has been particularly successful in engaging with 'non-traditional volunteers' (a term used by local organisations). These are people with little or no history of volunteering and who tend to be unemployed or on very low incomes, are in receipt of state benefits and may have long-term physical and mental health issues. They may be socially isolated and have previously had little engagement with local community organisations.

The research found that, for this group, the experience of earning Time Credits was overwhelmingly positive, with evidence of both direct and indirect health benefits. The key pathways to health for this group are associated with improved confidence, community and social participation, and a reduction in loneliness.

Positive outcomes for volunteers

A conceptual model was developed to guide the research. It was amended to reflect the research findings and shows how earning and spending Time Credits can lead to positive health outcomes (see Figure 1 above).

Case study – 'Alice'

Alice had previously had a career working with children, but poor health had kept her from working for nearly a decade. Time Credits made it possible to return to working with children at the Orchards School, something she loves doing. After a period of volunteering, the school gave her a formal paid job. Volunteering gave her an opportunity to share her skills and to make use of her previous experience and training. Most importantly, she became a valued member of a community:

"When I went to the first Time Credits meeting, at that point, I never ever had anybody come visit me... the only people I spoke to were my neighbours. I always worried, because I am diabetic, if I'm ill that nobody would find me. Now, I go to that school every day, I may go in sad but I come out with a smile on my face... I finally got somebody, who, if I don't turn up at school, they will come looking to see if I'm alright".

Case study – 'Peter'

Peter was living in a hostel halfway house and had begun volunteering in the Ferry Project kitchen after his release from prison. Now he volunteers most days and treats it like a job. Peter described how he had learnt new skills and found a new passion. He feels like he's giving something back to the community. He enjoys the voluntary work and it gives him a sense of achievement, and hopefully a route into paid employment. Spending Time Credits has enabled him to rebuild his relationship with his wife and daughter:

"We are on benefits and the money only stretches so far... using the Time Credits, it gives me enjoyment to take my little girl to the movies with what I have earned. If it wasn't for the Time Credits, we wouldn't be doing that many things with her. And because we go out more, we are closer as a family."

Better physical and mental health

The research found that earning Time Credits can have both direct and indirect health benefits for individuals. People have experienced improvements in their physical health.

"I was told that I need to keep my weight down. So I thought, if I come here, it's better for me. If I'm on my feet all day, that'll help me keep my weight down instead of sitting next door in my room all day, moping all the time, and succumbing to depression."

They have also seen improvements in their mental health.

"Since I've been working here, my depression has been a lot better and I've got a lot more confidence to talk to people... I'm more confident and upbeat, and I get up at a reasonable time."

Reduced loneliness and social exclusion

A key finding has been the way in which earning and spending Time Credits has reduced loneliness and social exclusion.

"I was getting lonely. I thought what am I going to do with myself?...I come out and I feel like 'wow', I've got my energy back."

Earning and spending Time Credits has enabled people to feel that they are making a positive contribution, with positive knock on effects on their self-worth and wellbeing.

"It has made me feel that I'm a person again. I feel appreciated. I'm not just a person at home doing housework."

Skills and employability

The research found evidence of improved self-confidence and skills development. Volunteering gave people work experience, and in some cases paved their way into paid employment.

"They have to learn about work patterns, that you have to start on time, not take cigarette breaks whenever you like. They found this very difficult. Even what to wear is hard to learn. These are skills we take for granted... Some volunteers are now employed... I hope they are financially better off but the greater thing is that they feel better about themselves."

Strengthening families

An important finding has been the way in which Time Credits have supported the strengthening of family and wider relationships. Families do activities together and for some children spending Time Credits is the only time they do anything outside the house as a family.

"One lady, her kids never left the house but she will use Time Credits to take them out in the holidays."

They have given people resources to access activities and services that they would not otherwise be able to afford or would not have tried. One of the key challenges identified by organisations was developing opportunities to spend Time Credits that are community based. Most are reliant on volunteers spending their Time Credits on external activities, most frequently, the cinema and swimming. The research also found that most organisations and volunteers felt that there was a lack of local spend opportunities in the area, partly because Wisbech is relatively isolated and because many volunteers cannot afford transport.



We make a living by
what we get. We make
a life by what we give.
Winston Churchill

Outcomes for organisations and the community

The research found that being able to offer Time Credits has enabled local organisations and services to recruit more volunteers and to increase their capacity. But it has also challenged stereotypes and brought diverse people together in a way that makes the local community more cohesive.

“It has also changed staff attitudes. Some staff thought that ‘these people’ volunteering would be a hindrance not a help. Then they realised that they have skills. The staff started to see them in a different way... Understandings have changed.”

It has led to a recognition of the skills that exist in the community and a desire to nurture and support people into employment.

“But what I am most proud of is getting people into jobs. These people would not apply for jobs and now they have paid jobs.”

The use of Time Credits has allowed organisations to develop a more reciprocal relationship with volunteers and, in some cases, to engage people in the design of services in a more co-productive way.

“When people have nothing, it’s nice to be able to offer them something in return for their efforts.”

Conclusions

Time Credits are a relatively simple concept, but they are a complex community intervention with numerous interconnected outcomes and multiple pathways to positive change.

The research shows that earning Time Credits can have both direct and indirect health benefits for individuals. People gained a sense of purpose and felt that they were making a positive contribution to a community which increased their life satisfaction and improved their mental health.

They became more physically active and more socially connected. There is also evidence of increased confidence and development of skills and work experience to support moving into paid employment.

Spending Time Credits gave members resources to access activities and services that they would not otherwise be able to afford. Time Credits were spent on activities which lead to a more active lifestyle, such as swimming, with direct health benefits. They were also spent on family activities which lead indirectly to positive health outcomes by improving social capital, social participation and overall wellbeing.

Time Credits provide the opportunity to be active citizens, to share experiences and skills and to make positive contributions that foster a sense of inclusiveness and enable people to help shape their own community. The research suggests that they are a way to engage local people to develop more inclusive, cohesive and resilient communities.

To find out more

To download all of the outputs from the research please go to our website at:

cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Projects/Start-Year/2015/Evaluating-Public-Health-Outcomes-Cambridgeshire-Time-Credits-Project

If you would like to discuss the research, please contact Dr Gemma Burgess on 01223 764547.

To find out more about Time Credits, please see the Spice website at:

justaddspice.org/get-involved/get-started-with-time-credits

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